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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NICOSIA 000777

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE, EUR/ERA, WHA/CCA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [CY](#) [CU](#)

SUBJECT: CYPRUS TO OPEN EMBASSY IN HAVANA

REF: A. NICOSIA 277

[B.](#) 07 NICOSIA 340

[C.](#) NICOSIA 94

Classified By: Ambassador Frank Urbancic, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

[¶](#)11. (C) SUMMARY: Perhaps the only surprise in the Cypriot Foreign Ministry's September 24 declaration that it would open an embassy in Havana was that the government had waited so long. Cuba holds a fond spot in the heart of Demetris Christofias, the communist AKEL party chairman elected RoC president in February. The MFA in 2007 had revealed plans to open a dozen new missions by 2010. Public debate over an expanded presence in Havana did not begin in earnest until August, however, when the government spokesman announced "it was time to open an embassy in Cuba, a nation that had supported Cyprus since its independence." Some blowback ensued, both from the Cypriot right -- for obvious reasons -- but also from centrist pundits who worried the Caribbean overture could anger Cuban-American legislators whom the Greek/Greek Cypriot diaspora were lobbying actively. Ministry officials in Nicosia later suggested that news of Havana's opening was premature, only to be contradicted on September 24 by a Cypriot diplomat in New York. Local media subsequently reported that U.S. Senator Robert Menendez was angered by the move. END SUMMARY.

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Solidarity Amongst Islanders  
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[¶](#)12. (C) Relations between Nicosia and Havana long have been cozy (Ref A). Despite their dissimilar backgrounds, for example, Cyprus's first president, Archbishop Makarios, established friendly ties with Fidel Castro in the 1960s. Mainstream Cypriot leaders from various political parties have visited the Caribbean isle and not shied from photo opportunities with Fidel and his flunkies, and even under right-wing President Glafkos Clerides (1993-2003), Cyprus supported Cuba in the UN and other international bodies. Now, of course, Cyprus is governed by Christofias, whose office walls (at least at party HQ) feature prominent photos of Che Guevara and other Cuban Revolution heroes. News that the President had ordered the opening of an embassy in Havana as one of his first acts in office therefore would have come as no surprise here.

[¶](#)13. (U) Six months would pass before the matter spawned significant public attention, however. Government Spokesman Stefanos Stefanou, in an August 24 interview with G/C daily "Politis," expressed the conviction that, as a sovereign nation, Cyprus was entitled to establish and maintain international relations as it saw fit. "Cuba traditionally supported Cyprus," he explained, and had established a diplomatic mission on the island shortly after the RoC gained independence from Great Britain in 1960. Such a fact could

not be ignored by the government as it evaluated plans for the establishment of additional embassies. "Absolutely, we believe the time is right for Cyprus to open a mission in Havana...whose location would allow it to play a role in strengthening not only relations with Havana, but also with other countries in Latin America," Stefanou explained.

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Yet Support for Decision Not Unanimous  
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¶4. (C) Cypriots on balance harbor positive feelings toward Cubans, dating back to their countries' membership and cooperation in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM); Stephanou's pronouncements therefore generated little controversy in Nicosia coffee shops and corner bars. Right-of-center Embassy contacts muttered "I told you so's," however, in reference to the country's purported tilt leftward since Christofias's February election, and only half-joked that the communist leader might next seek upgraded relations with the likes of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez or Bolivia's Evo Morales. More thoughtful analysis of the move soon followed, with G/C journalists questioning whether green-lighting a new embassy ran counter to the European Union's common policy on Cuba. And in a sidebar piece published shortly after the Stephanou interview, "Politis" columnist Makarios Droushiotis posed an intriguing question: would upgrading relations with Havana compromise recent RoC lobbying efforts in Washington that had targeted influential Cuban-American lawmakers like Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ), Congressman Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-FL), and Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL)? PolChief raised Droushiotis's theory on August 20 with

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visiting RoC lobbyist Panicos (Peter) Papanicolau, who had organized Senator Menendez's December 2007 visit to Cyprus. Papanicolau evinced no apparent concern over plans for opening the Havana embassy and reported that the Senator would pay a follow-up, private visit to Cyprus before year's end.

¶5. (C) In two late-August meetings at the Foreign Ministry, the Embassy attempted to verify whether Stefanou's "the time is right" statement amounted to official RoC policy. Opinions were divided. Then-Acting Political Director (P-equivalent) George Kasoulides dismissed news of an imminent embassy in Havana, citing the same reasons as Droushiotis -- that such a decision risked angering the influential Cuban-American legislative community that Cyprus was attempting to cultivate. The Ministry did intend to open up to a dozen new missions before 2009 (Ref B), Kasoulides noted, but of greater utility were new embassies in the Gulf countries and larger Latin American capitals like Brasilia and Buenos Aires. A different take on developments came from Cyprus Question Division Deputy Maria Michael, a Spanish-speaker and regular Cuba visitor whose Mercedes sports a "Viva Cuba" bumper sticker. While informing that the MFA had no formal instructions to establish an embassy in Cuba in 2009, she chuckled that "they're (other senior diplomats) already fighting over who will open it -- and unfortunately, it won't be me."

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Off Again...On Again  
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¶6. (C) The story lay dormant until September 23, when online newspaper "Offside," whose writers often scoop the mainstream media, wrote that President Christofias, in New York for the UN General Assembly, "has been pressed by U.S. politicians not to open an embassy in Havana. Opposition did not come from State Department officials, but from personalities considered long-time friends of Cyprus, like Senator Robert Menendez." Christofias allegedly had met Menendez in Papanicolau's New York-area home, where the two men, their positions irreconcilable, eventually agreed to disagree.

English-language "Cyprus Mail" published "Offside's" article on September 24, and the "Mail's" correspondent obtained a quote from an unnamed MFA official traveling with Christofias: "opening an embassy is a natural progression to the excellent relations shared between Cyprus and Cuba." Outgoing MFA Political Director (and former ambassador in Washington) Euripides Evriviades confirmed his colleague's account in an email exchange September 25, noting the Havana mission would open sometime in 2009.

**¶7.** (C) A Presidential Palace contact with close access to President Christofias shed more light on the Cuba decision on September 26. She claimed that the President, who talked freely amongst Palace staff, had begun discussing opening the embassy just weeks after his inauguration and already had secured funding from the House. The Menendez meeting had proven a debacle, however. Christofias erroneously had accepted lobbyist Papanicolau's assertions that he (Papanicolau) could sway the U.S. Senator, and all the President would have to do is show up for Menendez to drop his objections. "He did not, of course, and Christofias looked stupid," she concluded.

**¶8.** (U) Foreign Minister Markos Kyprianou jetted from New York to Havana on September 28; the MFA website reports he will meet counterpart Felipe Perez Roque and the head of the Cuban National Assembly, as well as investment and economic assistance officials, during the two-day official visit. Cypriot media on September 29 speculated that Kyprianou also would announce the embassy's opening from Havana.

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Comment  
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**¶9.** (C) Proponents and detractors alike agree that Demetris Christofias has lifted Cyprus's international reputation from the nadir of the Tassos Papadopoulos era (2003-2008). One element of his charm campaign involved seeking improved relations with the U.S. (Ref C), likely a tough swallow for long-time anti-"imperialist" leader. In recent weeks, however, Christofias has proven that leopards don't easily change their East-West spots. On Abkhazia/Ossetia, for example, Cyprus was loathe to criticize Russian aggression even after Moscow formally recognized the separatist regions. And in opening an embassy in Cuba, Christofias has chosen to

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maintain Cold War-era communist solidarity regardless of possible negative consequences for his country's lobbying campaign in Washington.

Urbancic